

Effectiveness of policies targeted at promoting healthier diets

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Food safety, healthy diets and trade

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Outline

- 1 Ex-post evaluation of healthy eating
- 2 Policy options
 - Labelling
 - Fiscal measures
 - Nutrient standards
- 3 Trade, food safety & healthy eating
- 4 Conclusions



On ex-post evaluation

The challenge of evaluating (National-level) healthy eating policies:

- Focus is on effectiveness
- Settle for intermediate outcomes? (e.g. F&V intake rather than disease reduction)
- Randomized settings are seldom considered (exception: SNAP/HIP pilot in Massachusetts)
- When data are non-experimental, impact estimation is not straightforward: there may be 'noises' in measurements, non-representative samples and other policy-independent variables affecting the outcomes
- There is a trade-off between the time frame of evaluation (long-term vs. short term effects) and the identification of causal effects



Current evidence basis: Overview

Criteria:

- Policy with explicit nutrition focus implemented (or continued) at national (state) level after year 2000
- Evaluation must be ex post, on observational data and with some "counterfactual" consideration

Policy	Adoption levels / trends	Ex post evidence on national policies			
		Availab.	Studies identified	Direction	Strength
Supporting more informed choice					
Advertising restrictions	Low (higher for voluntary codes)	Limited	12	Comprehensive regulation effective, other ineffective	Suggestive, short-term
Information campaigns	High and rising	High	10	Effective	Strong
Nutrition education	Medium (rising)	Very scarce	0	NA	NA
Labelling regulations	High and rising	Medium	13	Effective in inducing reformulation, less on intakes	Suggestive
Changing the market environment					
Fiscal measures	High and rising	High	16	Effective in changing prices and consumption	Suggestive / strong
School environment	High and rising	High	18	Effective in changing school behaviours, but not overall diet	Suggestive / strong
Mandatory nutrition standards	Medium (rising)	Scarce	3	Good compliance, effective in reducing unhealthy nutrients	Suggestive
Voluntary nutrition standards	High and rising	High	5	Effective	Suggestive
Accessibility measures	Low (mainly local)	Scarce	3	Mixed	Suggestive

Source: Mazzocchi (2017), Trade Policy Technical Notes, No. 19



Ex-post evidence on labelling measures

- High adoption (and heterogeneous approaches)
- Large body of studies, mostly experimental evidence, but also a dozen of rigorous ex post evaluations
- Evidence varies depending on target & approach, but:
 - Suggestive of small but significant effect on specific-nutrient intakes
 - Not much evidence on behavioural change and health effects
 - Increasing evidence on **reformulation effects**
 - More evidence on substitution patterns is needed



Taxes 'Fat & Soda' (& subsidies?)

- Exponential rise in adoption (sugar more than fat)
- They are transmitted to prices (but firm strategic behaviours exist)
- They reduce consumption, but the price effect is generally too small to generate noticeable health gains
- We don't know enough (yet) about substitutions, potential for reformulation and signalling effects
- City-level poll-based US taxes make a major step in that direction
- Is the ultimate effect of taxes larger than the price-induced one?



Nutrient standards and reformulation

- Not very popular, mostly voluntary agreements
- Hard to isolate reformulation effect
- When clearly targeted, they are effective in improving diets (especially if compulsory)
- High potential in combination with other policy measures (e.g. labelling, but also taxation?)



Trade, food safety & healthy eating

- Trade is crucial: it affects prices, availability and standards
- Balancing nutrition, safety and competitiveness through trade policies is a huge (but worth taking) governance challenge
- We don't have much (robust) evidence on the relations between healthy eating policies and trade, while recognizing its importance



Some final considerations

- We have examples of effectiveness from most policy options, but we need more evidence on (a) substitution and reformulation patterns; (b) how to maximise health outcomes; and (c) multi-level policies;
- We struggle to evaluate long-term policies (e.g. education), does this generate a bias in adoption?
- Healthy eating policies have major trade implications, and trade policies impact on the healthiness of diets, but more evidence is needed

